

CARTOGRAPHIES

THE CARTOGRAPHIC EYE: MAPPING AND IDEOLOGY

Simon Ryan

We in the fields of literary criticism might think of geographers as stodgily and resolutely empirical, concerned with the use value of their discipline and eschewing critical theory debates. In fact the discipline of geography has offered several incisive critiques of its methods, productions and the ideology or ideologies which drive it. It has become obvious to geographers that their own practice cannot be magically differentiated from other rhetorical practices. The 'objective' description that geography offers is as penetrated with rhetorical structures as a description more usually associated with the field of the 'literary'. The debates about the representational aspects of geography (as apart from methodologies) has had an interesting effect upon a subset of geography, cartography. The arguments have focused on two points.

First is the realisation that maps do not reflect reality but produce it in a number of ways, and in so doing represent particular interests and create various realities. Thus the seemingly innocent Mercator projection map of the world has been criticised for its exaggeration of the northern hemisphere landmasses at the expense of the equatorial regions; a projection which can produce a United Kingdom (242, 496 sq k) which looks as large as Madagascar (587, 041 sq k) may be said to aid a kind of European misunderstanding of its significance in the world. But I do not want to read maps semiotically so much as follow a second path of critiquing the subject positions that maps offer, namely, the positions from which maps are constructed and read.

To establish what subject positions maps offer, and to find if mapping itself contains an ideology or world view, we need to return to the familiar haunts of Florence in the year 1435. Here Leon Battista Alberti was producing his *Della Pittura (On Painting)* which was the groundwork for the development of linear perspective. A detailed exposition of perspective is not needed here; what I want to point out is that perspective as a method is relentlessly centred upon the eye. Alberti understood the rays of vision to emanate from the eye—and it was a single eye, none of this binocular nonsense. The success of linear perspective in painting is, of course, its ability in concert with oils, canvas and so on to obtain the effect of realism.

Perspective fixed objects in space relative to each other, and also constructed a fixed position for a viewer. Indeed this fixed position that the viewer is given determines the relationship of the objects to each other. The illusion of reality that linear perspective creates

works only when the eye is at a fixed position and distance from the picture. The Renaissance painter Brunelleschi's first attempts at perspectival pictures required a peephole set in a particular place for the full reality effect. The character of perspective then was the establishment of this fixed, external and 'objective' view.

Samuel Edgerton in his work *Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (1975) points out that the Ptolemaic geography then newly read influenced this development of perspective. The projection Ptolemy used to represent a three dimensional object on a planar surface was in some ways similar to the painter's use of perspective, and Alberti, who along with Brunelleschi developed painterly perspective, was certainly influenced by Ptolemy. Of course, cartography had not at that stage diverged from art—maps of the time are full of cartouches, side views of cities and so on. But what is interesting is that the viewing position offered by Renaissance perspective art and mapping should be so similar.

If Brunelleschi's 'peephole' connotes a kind of voyeuristic pleasure as well as the more straightforward power inhering in the external observer whose presence orders and controls all, then perhaps maps offer a similar viewing position. Certainly Renaissance mapmakers, who had, as I have said, not disciplined art and cartography into separate spheres, felt the voyeuristic possibilities of maps. As Jose Rabasa has noted in his important article 'Allegories of the Atlas' in the collection *Europe and its Others* (1985), Abraham Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* presented the map as a device which may be used to 'peep upon those places, townes and Forts, which lye most advantageous and commodius to satisfy...ambition' (9). Brunelleschi's peephole admits one eye only, and Ortelius' maps are instruments of voyeuristic power wherein the renaissance man may spy on his enemies while safely closeted. There is no danger of the gaze being returned.

Maps aggressively construct the observer as a viewer in space, to whom the earth is fully revealed. In two dimensions as a Mercator projection it is fully transportable, even if its 'accuracy' is degraded by the inevitable distortions of projection. Ultimately, the map is a successful tool of knowledge compilation because it convinces us that it is an 'accurate representation' of the real. It works because it convinces us that it is 'the' world, that no other worlds can be shown. It is at its most effective when it is disguising its peephole origins, making one take for granted the elevated viewpoint it gives to the map reader. It effaces the perspectival projection (the point of view) of who is describing the world to be thus.

Let me now turn to some examples from Australian exploration and the way mapping and seeing are written about. Obviously there is an instrumentalist agenda to the making of maps by explorers. Whatever the myths of heroic discovery, the aims of exploration were pragmatic—discovery of exploitable land. So the maps may be seen within the ensemble of cartographic practices utilised in the Euro-domination of large parts of the earth and its indigenous societies. The production of the map as a product of disinterested science is, of course, a pretence. Maps which are enclosed in journals of exploration are not only rhetorically dense themselves, but also they are attached to a dense medium, the journal, which, like the map, disavows its rhetorical constructedness—journals are replete with prefatorial denials of intentions to do anything but plainly describe what the explorer saw. We might expect that exploration journals construct the explorer in mapping and overlooking the country as having a point of view similar to the one I have outlined—removed, above, exterior to the scene. As Michel de Certeau writes of the Cartesian (and cartographer's) point of view,

His elevation transforms him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive; the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more. (36)

Explorers construct themselves in exactly this way. As Paul Carter has noted, height is all important to a surveyor, such as Thomas Mitchell—indeed, to put it in his own words, 'the visible possibility of overlooking the country from any eminence, is refreshing at all times,

but to an explorer it is everything' (157-58).

This sovereign subjectivity is not without complexities. Ethnographic surveillance has no such requirement for height, yet the adversarial nature of the explorer/Aborigine interaction creates height as a strategic and military advantage. The concept of a 'commanding' position is found in Edward Eyre's description of a competitive encounter between his party and a group of Aborigines which is worth recounting at length:

Our camp had been on the low ground, near the water, in the midst of many hills, all of which commanded our position. There were now a great many well armed natives around us, and though they were very kind and friendly, I did not like the idea of their occupying the acclivities immediately above us...I therefore had everything removed to the hill next above them, and was a good deal amused by the result of this manoeuvre, for they seemed equally uneasy as we had been at the heights above them being occupied. In a very short time they had also broke up camp, and took possession of the next hill beyond us...I determined [to] take up our position on the highest hill we could find. This was a very scrubby one, but by a vigorous application of the axes for an hour or two, we completely cleared its summit; and then taking up the drays, tent, baggage &c. we occupied the best and most commanding station in the neighborhood. (1: 226-27)

The language of military arrogation of land is difficult to miss—the two parties 'occupy' and take 'possession' of the land, and positions are also 'taken'. The real estate scramble is not for its own sake, or to obtain 'innocent' scenic views, but to carry out surveillance on the other group; if politics may be defined as who does what to whom, then this kind of surveillance is an exercise of political power, though the important question is who gets to watch whom. The explorer's final conquest and possession of the highest hill is only an advantage when it is transformed into a treeless summit, an activity which displays the interdependence of power and surveillance. The final victory of the explorers should not disguise the fact that the passage contains the resistance of the Aborigines to this exercise of power; the Europeans' surveillance is met with a response which demonstrates that the power in the text is not solely that of the colonising force.

Despite this apparent victory, it is clear that explorers are never happy being the object of another's gaze. To depoliticise this battle for surveillance they invest ultimate surveillant power in a divinity who seems to have nothing better to do than spy on people. The explorers fashion a world saturated with levels of surveillance, with God the ultimate surveillant, his benevolent watchfulness serving as evidence of the righteousness of the explorer's task. Writing of his survival, Charles Sturt states that

in the wide field of nature, we see the hand of an over-ruling Providence, evidence of care and protection from some unseen quarter, which strike the mind with overwhelming conviction, that whether in the palace or in the cottage, in the garden, or in the desert, there is an eye on us. (1: 9-10)

This is a particularly democratic surveillance, penetrating both palace and cottage, but in invading these relatively safe places, it is intimated that it has a judgemental as well as benevolently watchful function. The explorers' survival is usually taken as evidence of divine approval of their activities—John Lort Stokes confesses that he believes that 'His Eye to whom the darkness and light are both alike, watched over our safety' (2: 88) and that 'our preservation can only be attributed to Him whose eye is on all his creatures and who disposes of our lives as it seemeth good in his sight' (2: 282). Divine surveillance is constructed as a larger version of explorative practices—the vision of the explorer echoes the greater vision of God. Stokes climbs a hill to look over the country, and remembers that it is the same hill that Cook climbed to try to see if there was a passage out of the reefs which had imprisoned his ship. Cook's watchfulness is rewarded by his discovery of Providence Channel, a name, Stokes alerts the reader, 'which must ever remind us of Him, who in moments when our lives hang by a thread, is ever watchful, and spares us in the exercise of his inscrutable will' (1: 347). The explorative gaze is a microform of the divine gaze—the flow of the gaze cannot be

reversed, and must always be directed from the 'higher' point to the 'lower'. The 'higher' surveillance is invisible to those below, or at least shrouded in an impenetrable mystery—God's will is 'inscrutable'. And of course explorers always construct themselves as objects of wonder and mystery to Aboriginal observers.

Exploration literature can never efface the role of the explorer as point of view as well as can a map, although George Grey's description of country which 'lay like a map at our feet' attempts to arrogate to his view the certainty that is provided by cartographical representation (1: 180). The view, of course, is nothing like a map with its codes, colouring and two-dimensionality, yet the highest praise that a view can have is that it is like a map. That the real is approached through a comparison with cartography is a strategy to enhance the explorer's claim to accuracy, and also to adopt a technique of map-reading advised by Ortelius. Remember Ortelius has defined the map as a military tool allowing one to 'peep upon those places, townes and Forts, which lye most advantageous and commodious to satisfy...ambition' (Rabasa 9). After noting that he can read the land like a map Grey catalogues the 'natural riches', 'the finest harbours' of the land and that it is 'singularly favoured by nature' (1: 180). 'Singularly favoured' for what purpose the text does not say, yet it is clear that the land is being surveyed by this distant eye for possible future exploitation. This is not particularly surprising in an explorer; yet it is surprising how often the spatialisation of land, through maps and descriptions of vistas, is intimately connected with its temporalisation.

The word 'prospect' plays a dual role in many of the explorers' descriptions, both embodying the idea of looking out into space and of looking forward into time (see in particular Denis Cosgrove on this issue). In speaking of the journey itself, it is often the case that the prospect spatially ahead is the prospect of travel the explorers have before them in time (eg. Eyre 1: 59, 356). A prospect is often taken as a moment in which it is appropriate to comment on the future of the colony. Grey says, after describing a 'beautiful prospect', that he 'painted in fancy the rapid progress that this country would ere long make in commerce and civilization' (1: 163). Contemplations on the future are not simply associated with seeing distances but the very word 'prospect' encourages the temporalisation of a spatial perspective. Mitchell writes that the 'prospect of an open country has a double charm in regions for the most part covered with primeval forests, calling up pleasing reminiscences of the past, brighter prospects for the future' (309). These private reminiscences of the English countryside, provoked by the open country, are part of the self-serving reading of the Australian landscape, a view of it as ready-made for the colonial enterprise, which the 'brighter prospects' suggest. The hierarchy of vision is not forgotten when prospects of the future are discussed. Stokes writes that 'men of the highest eminence have foreseen and foretold the ultimate importance of that vast continent o'er which, within the memory of living man, the roving savage held precarious though unquestioned empire' (1: 1). These men of the 'highest eminence' are able to see furthest into the future because of their 'high' position; the future is seen as clearly belonging to that imperial narrative which informs history, that history cannot stand outside. As Grey cannot see the land except as a map, so too is the future seen through the equally culturally-constructed imperial narrative. A history outside this history cannot be imagined and thus through the temporalisation of a spatial construction of the land the 'orthogonality, the perspectival projection' of this history is forgotten.

Postmodernism

We might suppose that with the advent of postmodernism, however one might define it, and the development of cyberspace and the internet, that this external 'Archimedean point' would be shattered by the multiplicity of viewing points we are told we are now offered. Yet this seems to me a bit naive. Critiques of colonial culture and those working within a postcolonial framework cannot forget that the 'post' in postcolonial or the 'post' in postmodernism does not mean that some border has been crossed. As Mieke Bal writes:

Focussing attention on the presence of the colonial imagination in today's post-colonial society is not a gesture of ahistoricism—on the contrary. Problematising

historical distance and analyzing the way streams of the past still infuse the present make historical inquiry meaningful. (Qtd in Gregory 177)

It seems to me that in this supposedly fractured age that new geographical information systems do not necessarily abandon the privileged point-of-view and the world-as-exhibition structure. One of the latest productions is a CD ROM of the Murray River, its entire length viewed from above. One now simply scrolls down the river. There is a whole genre of computer games called GOD games, where the player's point of view is fixed above a map-like world where the effects of her or his decisions unfold. One of these is Colonisation where the sovereign point of view is that of a master coloniser—your task is to establish the colony, defend against other European powers and either appease or destroy the natives. Finally, at the Royal National Association show every August in Brisbane, in the Arts and Craft sections we see among the prize-winning sponge cakes and endless repetitions of country scene watercolours the schoolchildren's projects, amongst which are invariably maps of Australia tracing in thin red lines on otherwise blank white the paths of explorers who have 'discovered' the country. Pasted next to these will be small pictures of each explorer. The mythology of explorers 'discovering' a previously 'unknown' country is obviously severely dated, yet it is still dominant despite Mabo. Like the maps in exploration volumes, the only significant space is that which the explorers covered—all else is blank and empty. These types of maps are easy to criticise in terms of their semiotics, but the very fact that we look from above to a land revealed to our eyes is something we also may critique.

Australian Catholic University

Works Cited

- de Certeau, Michel. *On the Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Cosgrove, Denis. 'Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea'. *Transcriptions of the Institute of British Geographers* 10 (1985): 45-62.
- Edgerton, Samuel Y. *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- . 'From Mental Matrix to Mappamundi to Christian Empire: The Heritage of Ptolemaic Cartography in the Renaissance'. *Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays*. Ed. David Woodward. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987. 10-50.
- Eyre, Edward John. *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound, in the Years 1840-1*. 2 vols. London: T. & W. Boone, 1845.
- Gregory, Derek. *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994.
- Grey, George. *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia, during the years 1837, 38, and 39, under the Authority of Her Majesty's Government Describing Many Newly Discovered, Important, and Fertile Districts, with Observations on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Aboriginal Inhabitants*. 2 vols. London: T. & W. Boone, 1841.
- Mitchell, Thomas. *Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia: In Search of a Route from Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria*. London: Longman, 1848.
- Rabasa, Jose. 'Allegories of the Atlas'. *Europe and Its Others*. Ed. Francis Barker et al. Proceedings of the Essex Sociologies of Literature Conference 1984. Colchester: U of Essex P, 1985. 2: 1-16.
- Stokes, John Lort. *Discoveries in Australia; with an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle, in the years 1837-43*. London: T. & W. Boone, 1846.
- Sturt, Charles. *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia, Performed under the Authority of Her Majesty's Government, During the Years 1844, 5 and 6 together with a Notice of the Province of South Australia, in 1847*. 2 vols. London: T. & W. Boone, 1849.

Tadowski, T., H. Tane and P. Nanninga. 'The River Murray on CD ROM'. *Cartography* 22.2 (1993): 21-24.

White, John. *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*. London: Faber, 1957.